

STAGES OF SPRAWL

PROMPTED BY THE ONSLAUGHT OF DEVELOPMENT ON THE LAND OF HIS ANCESTORS,
A PHOTOGRAPHER EMBARKS ON AN INTENSE EXPLORATION OF URBAN ONTARIO'S RELENTLESS MARCH,
DEEPER AND DEEPER, INTO ITS RURAL MARGINS **PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER SIBBALD**



After a noose of single-family homes closed in on his Guelph farm (BELOW), Jack Ingram sold the farmhouse and some land to the city for use as a community centre and park and won the right to develop the rest. "New urbanist" neighbourhoods, such as Markham's Cornell (ABOVE), are designed to avoid the cookie-cutter look of most suburbs.





This towering maple (ABOVE LEFT) is all that remains of a farmer's field behind what is now the GO train station in Newmarket, south of Lake Simcoe. The new sod is part of a landscaping plan. Heavy equipment leaves deep tracks (ABOVE RIGHT) in topsoil whose only future crop will be more houses. Construction begins on another development in Newmarket (OPPOSITE TOP). The Walker family cemetery west of Port Hope (OPPOSITE BOTTOM) remains unmolested, although it sits on land that is not protected by greenbelt legislation, which reserves a ribbon of land in the Golden Horseshoe for agriculture and public use, including parks and hiking trails.

‘MY APPROACH IS VISCERAL. FOOD AND CLEAN AIR AND WATER ARE NOT INTELLECTUAL CONSTRUCTS. IF MY VIEW SEEMS SOMETIMES DYSTOPIAN — FOR THERE CAN BE A TERRIBLE UGLINESS TO WHAT WE ARE MAKING — IT ALSO SUGGESTS THAT WE STILL HAVE CHOICES.’

— PHOTOGRAPHER PETER SIBBALD





This “Huge Nature Reserve” (TOP) was once a 30-hectare heritage farm. It is now part of Upper Cornell. These “Golden Opportunity” signs (OPPOSITE) were replaced by a No Frills store, while the waterway that ran through the property was encased in concrete and directed into a storm-water retention pond. Part of the appeal of the lots advertised on this billboard (ABOVE) in Stouffville is that many are on the greenbelt, perhaps zoned before passage of the provincial Greenbelt Act in 2005.



Abandoned farm machinery (RIGHT) and a stately old maple on the edge of the Rouge River (LEFT) speak to the presence of those who have gone before and a lost way of life. Now, the telltale tracks of heavy equipment (BELOW) pave the way for the development of 2,500 new homes in Markham on the pioneer family farms of James and Adam Clendenen.





A stand of lilacs attests to generations of occupation of this now derelict farmhouse (ABOVE), bordered by development in Vaughan, just north of Toronto. A backhoe blocks access to the Markham Bypass (OPPOSITE), while a mound of soil removed from adjacent fields provides a view of the future (BELOW). A topsoil manufacturer mixes livestock manure with rich earth (at right). After heavy spring rains, contaminants from the manure flow across the land to a nearby tributary of the Rouge River.



RESCULPTING THE HOMESTEAD

BY JOHN LORINC

IN THE EARLY DECADES of the 19th century, a Scotswoman named Susan Sibbald travelled to Upper Canada and settled on a plot of forest north of muddy York, on Lake Simcoe. Like so many of her fellow immigrants, Sibbald worked her homestead, transforming it from wilderness to rich farmland. That land is now just beyond Greater Toronto's far-flung suburbs.

One of her descendants, photographer Peter Sibbald, grew up and continues to live in the same area, which, in the 1950s and 1960s, was still very much an agricultural society. The rural tranquility soon began to change in the face of relentless urban growth. In the mid-1990s, Sibbald, dismayed by the changes, resolved to use his camera to document how that historic landscape — with its tidy farms, Carolinian forests and ice-age waterways — succumbed so readily to a particularly voracious form of suburban sprawl. He describes the region, known by its area code, 905, as a place that is “neither city nor country, but some creature in between.”

“Post-agricultural” may be a more precise characterization. Between 1971 and 2001, Canada's urban areas gobbled up 15,000 square kilometres of farmland — an area three times the size of Prince Edward Island. And according to a recent Statistics Canada study, by 2001 more than 11 per cent of Ontario's best agricultural land had been turned to urban use — about double the proportion from 30 years earlier. “Once consumed,” the study says, “this land is, for all intents and purposes, permanently lost for agriculture.”

Sibbald's grimly eloquent photographs convey the sheer brutality with which suburban developers and highway construction crews bully and subjugate the languid countryside we naively think of as immutable. Hills are literally moved, vistas reorganized for optimal lot configuration. All evidence of farm life is eradicated. No match for the economic might of the building industry, all this land is efficiently stripped and sealed, thus rendering it unrecognizable to those who once may have lived and farmed on it.

Yet the suburbs, in a sense, also exemplify the geography of unintended consequences. The form dates to the late 19th century, and the visions of social reformers who wanted to build clean, family-friendly bedroom communities as alternatives to the filth and over-crowding of inner-city slums.

Hardly the haven envisioned by urban idealists, the contemporary suburb has evolved into an



SIBBALD'S GRIMLY ELOQUENT PHOTOGRAPHS

CONVEY THE SHEER BRUTALITY WITH WHICH SUBURBAN DEVELOPERS BULLY AND SUBJUGATE THE LANGUID COUNTRYSIDE WE NAIVELY THINK OF AS IMMUTABLE.

energy-consuming terrain in which engineered storm-water ponds are expected to moonlight as natural landmarks in a featureless environment. Ironically, “905” subdivisions easily pass muster with municipal planning officials, while the city's former working-class warrens are sought after by upscale professionals who hate the prospect of endless suburban commuting.

Sibbald's photographs tell the story of the raw newness that defines so much of the land mass of Greater Toronto. The suburbs in these photos will mature and improve, and the landscape will heal. Time itself will provide texture and subtlety. How much, remains to be seen. Amid the bloated highways and mega-malls, little more than the fragrance of farmers' fields is left, and that scent will disappear soon enough.

Toronto-based writer John Lorinc's book, The New City, was published by Penguin Canada in 2006.



Please e-mail editor@canadiangeographic.ca.

Visit www.canadiangeographic.ca/web/mj07.